

Second Sunday of Advent
Year C
9 December 2018

On this second Sunday of Advent, we hear again from John the Baptist. Each year, John shows up on this Sunday, so someone must think that he has something to say that we need to hear. The Scriptures we read this morning refer to God sending out messengers or prophets. Since it is repeated so many times, we should stop and take a look at the messengers and at the message they delivered.

To understand what the message they had was, let's look first at what the message was not. Notice that John did not call the people to judge other people. He called them to self-examination. John did not invite the people to repent and repair the synagogue. He urged them to see their own lives in light of what God had told them.

In the Old Testament passage, Malachi refers to a “refiner’s fire.” The tendency people have when they hear that is to focus on “those people” who need refining – but Malachi is talking about us. He isn’t saying “they will be refined and purified” but that “we will be purified.” Malachi points this out clearly in Chapter 2 (vv. 4-17) where he explains who is going to be refined. It is the people of the covenant, the people who claim to be God’s own. Why are they, why are we, to be purified? Malachi 2:17 tells us

You make God tired with all your talk. “How do we tire him out?”
you ask. By saying, "God loves sinners and sin alike. God loves all."
And also by saying, "Judgment? God's too nice to judge. (Mal 2:17
MSG)

You have taken God’s word and reworked it to fit your needs, your own agenda. As Voltaire, the French Enlightenment writer, historian and philosopher, said, “In the beginning God created man in His own image, and man has been trying to repay the favor ever since.” You have made God over in your own image, says the prophet. We have called good, evil and evil, good, according to Malachi. In the world today where we see faith and religious beliefs and

institutions being used to gain political leverage, are we not also reworking the eternal word of God? God got tired of that and told them that He was going to purify His people.

But what is to purify? The Hebrew word means to be bright. We should be shining examples. Jesus talks about hiding our light under a basket. When we hide our light like that, what happens? We start walking into walls. Let your light shine, Matthew tells us. (Matthew 5:16) “Oh, my light shines brightly every Sunday morning when I get here to the church.” However, Malachi isn’t talking about the church but rather that our light should shine in the world. The passage from Luke (3:4) that we heard this morning is a little bit of a problematic translation of Isaiah 40:3.

Isaiah reads “A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” The troublesome phrase is “in the wilderness.” Archeologists have found very early copies of passages from Isaiah that show us that there is a comma missing in the passage in Isaiah, but that Luke gets it right. It should read, “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘prepare the way of the Lord.’” We are not telling people to go prepare a path in the wilderness; we should already be in the wilderness ourselves talking about preparing the path. And what is wilderness? The word used here can mean desert or barren place. But it can also refer to speech. Barren speech, the clamor of everyday life and business: school, work, home, church, the TV, Christmas carols blaring out everywhere we go - those places where we hear constant idle chatter. Isaiah and John the Baptist are telling us that in the midst of all the clamor, that cacophony of empty words, we should be making things right as a messenger or prophet of the Lord.

Secondly, the message is telling us not to be spending our time preparing for some life in the afterworld. The concept of an afterlife was not part of the theology in the days of Jesus. That does not develop fully until around 200 years after the death and ascension of Christ. So, if Christ and the Apostles are not talking about an afterlife, what are they talking about? They’re talking about the here and now – what is around us, what we see on a day-to-day basis. Jesus repeatedly calls that the “Kingdom of God.” My grandmother used to talk about somebody being so focused on heaven that they were of no earthly good. This is sort of the idea of Jesus’

theology. Jesus is continually talking about us doing this or that in His name. However, nowhere does He talk about those things in the future tense – it is always present tense. He is saying **now** do this, **now** do that and your reward, the good outcome, will be **now**. The message of the messenger is not some pie-in-the-sky promise but help to deal with the everyday life that we all face. Over the next few weeks, as we become a part of the juggernaut of shoppers cramming ourselves through the doors of Cole’s, Macy’s, J C Penney’s, WalMart or clogging the Internet on the way to Amazon, the message is this: Don’t lose your focus – remember the Anointed One is coming.

The message is also not telling the people to come back to church. I know that goes against the grain of many clergy and denominations. But the real call of Advent is not to get people to the church but, instead, to get the church to the people. Our calling is not to build memberships in our church; it is not to develop a good Sunday School or choir program. Our calling is to go out to the world and meet needs out there – in the wilderness. Every Sunday morning, after communion, we pray, “And now Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve...” (BCP, p. 366) Send us out...

The Song of Zechariah says, “To give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of sin.” The root of the word “salvation” means “to save” or “to deliver.” The image here is that of a shepherd who delivers his flock from a wolf or some other marauding animal and then releases them back into the pasture in freedom. That shepherd does not leave the sheep in the sheepfold once they are safe but returns them to the wilderness.

There is a lot of talk around here from time to time about football. Let’s imagine that you’re the coach of the football team and you’ve got a quarterback that is in trouble. You call him (or her) over, and you talk to them about the problem. You work out a solution, and then you say to the quarterback, “now you are safe, and the problem is solved. Why don’t you sit down on the bench and watch the rest of the game?” What do you think the alumni, the faculty or the fans are going to think of that coach. But that is what many of us are trying to do. Christianity is not a spectator's sport. Sunday morning is not the main event. It should be the pep rally before the big game that comes during the week. We are never told to build a place for people

to come to – regardless of how inviting, warm or friendly it is. Remember the first word of Jesus' farewell address to His disciples and followers was "GO." (Matt. 28:19-20)

This is pretty heavy stuff for those messengers, those prophets, whomever they are. But who are they? Again, the Song of Zechariah answers that question for us. In Luke 1:76, Old Zack is talking to his son, John, but is also speaking beyond John to those people who will follow in his footsteps. He says "you will be called the prophet of the Most High..." A prophet? I will be called a prophet? What exactly is a prophet? The word does not mean one who predicts the future, but it does mean to say something clearly and outright. There is also another shade to the word. The Greek word is built on the word for poem or poet. Remember studying poetry in school? The teacher was always pushing us to see the meaning beyond the words – the underlying implication of the passage. That is a prophet. One who speaks clearly, bravely and outright but also who has deeper meanings to their words; meanings that they may not be aware of even when they speak the words.

The Scriptures repeatedly imply that we are the messengers that are being sent out into the world today. At Advent, we should especially be mindful of our mission. Our mission is not to bring people to Christ Church, Mexia. Our mission is not to occasionally visit the sick and take communion to the homebound. Our mission is not to provide food to a needy family a couple of times a year out of some self-imposed requirement or obligation. What is our mission? Are we to stop bringing food to needy people, stop visiting the sick, stop inviting people to come to church with us? No, of course not. Then what is our mission?

I have a friend who is a priest in Maryland, who tells of one Sunday morning when he was baptizing a little girl. During the baptism service, he anointed her forehead with oil. Later, the little girl asked what that meant. He told her that the oil meant that Jesus was with her all the time. From that moment on, every time that girl saw him, she would run over to him, throw her head back, look at him with a bright smile on her face, point to her forehead and ask, "Can you still see Jesus on me?"

That I believe is our message and our mission for Advent. There are people around us who, during this holiday season, are missing the anointing of the oil of the essence of love, of beauty,

of peace. For whatever reason, they don't know the peace and joy that we will sing about for the next five weeks. We will greet each other with the "peace of the Lord" while they seek meaning in their lives. They seek someone to show them that there is more to it than Santa Claus, reindeer, going into debt and pretending to enjoy the season.

On this second Sunday of Advent, as we are reminded that we are the messengers with a special message, we have to ask ourselves, does the world still see Jesus on me?

Does the world still see Jesus on me?

In the name of the one God: creator, redeemer, and sustainer.

Amen